

**Michel Foucault and postmodern atheism: life after the death of God *(excerpt)***

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**Summary**

The French intellectual Michel Foucault (1926-84) was one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century. His books on madness, medicine, knowledge, punishment and sexuality have had a major impact across a wide range of disciplines, and become set texts on undergraduate courses throughout Britain and America. His life, moreover, reflected some of the most significant cultural trends of the past thirty years: the rise of the gay subculture, the new openness to the non-rational, the growing experimentation with sex and drugs, the fascination with the body and the self. This essay suggests that Foucault was driven by an intense desire to find a substitute for communion with God.[1]

**Introduction**

In 1948 Michel Foucault attempted to commit suicide. He was at the time a student at the elite Parisian university, the Ecole Normale. The resident doctor there had little doubt about the source of the young man's distress. Foucault appeared to be racked with guilt over his frequent nocturnal visits to the illegal gay bars of the French capital. His father, a strict disciplinarian who had previously sent his son to the most regimented Catholic school he could find, arranged for him to be admitted to a psychiatric hospital for evaluation. Yet Foucault remained obsessed with death, joked about hanging himself and made further attempts to end his own life. This youthful experience of himself as homosexual, suicidal and mentally disturbed proved decisive for Foucault's intellectual development. The subject matter of many of his later hooks arose from his own experience - *Madness and Civilisation* (1961), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), *Discipline and Punish* (1975), and *The* *History of Sexuality* (3 vols, 1976-84) all dwelt on topics of deep personal concern to their author. Foucault's intellectual career was to be a lifelong crusade on behalf of those whom society labelled, marginalised, incarcerated and suppressed.[2]

**Foucault's Critique of Modernity**

As a crusader for liberation Foucault stood at the end of a long line of politically engaged French intellectuals - from Voltaire to Emile Zola to Jean-Paul Sartre. Yet Foucault's strategy for resisting oppression was in stark contrast to that employed by previous generations. Thinkers steeped in the assumptions of Christianity and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment had typically appealed to universal categories in order to overthrow tyranny. The French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789), for example, had insisted that the aim of every political association was to defend ‘the natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of man'.

Postmodern thinkers like Foucault have major problems with this Enlightenment approach. They question the very existence of rights which are natural, inalienable and sacred. If one does not believe in a Creator God, they point out, it is hard to see how all people can be endowed with such natural rights. The nineteenth century German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche - the grand-father of postmodernism - insisted that God was dead and that with him had died all notions of a universal human nature, or of absolute moral laws. These universals and absolutes were now exposed as mere human inventions. 'There are no moral facts whatever,' he declared. 'Moral judgement has this in common with religious judgement - that it believes in realities which do not exist.'[3]

In 1953 Foucault read Nietzsche for the first time, with 'a great passion'. He found Nietzsche's doctrines profoundly liberating, 'a revelation'. It occurred to Foucault that the moral and social 'truths' invoked in order to label him 'deviant' were mere fictions. There was no need to feel guilt over madness, homosexuality or suicidal tendencies. For the rest of his life, he would devote himself to showing how grand slogans and scientific terms were simply tools for legitimising relationships of power and domination.

In *Madness and Civilisation,* for example, Foucault examined how during the Age of Reason the mad were confined in institutions, whereas previously they had roamed free and been viewed with a certain respect. This 'great confinement', he pointed out, was justified in the name of Reason and Humanity. Those who did not conform to the conventional notion of what was rational were labelled as 'mad', a supposedly value-neutral term, and then marginalised through incarceration, 'the noble 'truths' trumpeted by the Enlightenment were employed to legitimise the exercise of domination, not to prepare the way to a more humane, rational, benign and liberal society. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault argued that the decline of torture and public execution and the rise of the prison was far from being a great moral advance. The modern prison, he suggested, does not simply work on people's bodies; it attempts to control their minds. Prisoners are categorised by experts, placed under surveillance, scrutinised and manipulated. Furthermore, he argued, the prison is a microcosm of modern society; we arc all under surveillance, labelled and pigeon-holed by bureaucracies, and locked away if we are found to be deviant or abnormal.

**The Response to Foucault**

Foucault’s protests meshed perfectly with the assumptions of a generation shaped by the counter-culture of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Conscious of Vietnam and Watergate, students were highly receptive to conspiracy theories featuring the oppressive power of the Establishment, and Foucault's ideas provided intellectual tools for radical new liberation movements. Most obviously, they were attractive to the burgeoning gay subculture. The universal norm of 'Nature' had been used in both Christian and Enlightenment discourse to brand the homosexual unnatural and perverse. Foucault claimed to unmask the universal norm as nothing more than a tool of oppression being wielded by the powerful. And in doing so he became one of the leading influences upon gay intellectuals and 'Queer Studies'.

Within mainstream intellectual culture, too, Foucault's work inspired extensive commentary. A decade after his death almost one hundred books have been published on his thought. Yet his provocative critique of modernity has not gone unchallenged. His critics argue that he oversimplifies complex developments, bases sweeping generalisations on slender evidence, and underestimates the great achievements of liberal democracies. They also complain that Foucault's work is riddled by internal contradictions. He attacks global norms such as Freedom and Justice, yet his protest against oppression implicitly assumes the very norms that he repudiates. He sets himself the task of unmasking truth-claims, yet he himself appears to be making truth-claims throughout his work. And although much of his thought presents the individual self as a passive victim of structural forces too powerful to resist, he also implies that liberation and self-creation are real possibilities.[4]

This final contradiction in Foucault's thinking seems all the more striking given what we now know about his own life. For as James Miller's recent book *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (1993) demonstrates, Foucault clearly thought of *himself* as an active agent, engaged in a personal project of turning his life into a unique work of art.

**Foucault and Self-Creation**

*The Passion of Michel Foucault* caused a storm of protest when it first appeared, for it focused on the most sensational aspects of Foucault's life. To some of Foucault's followers, Miller is a writer with an anti-Foucauldian agenda. Whereas Foucault spoke of the disappearance of the self, Miller places 'a persistent and purposeful self at the centre of his biography. Whereas Foucault aimed to unmask truth-claims as fronts for power relations. Miller frankly asserts that he has 'tried to tell the whole truth, as best I could'. And whereas Foucault protested against the ways in which modern society categorised and scrutinised people. Miller places Foucault's life under surveillance and tries to make 'sense' of it.

Miller, however, is not so easy to dismiss. He clearly admires Foucault, and his argument is based on a wealth of documentation. His stress on the self and truth-telling, moreover, fits with Foucault's later emphasis on the obligation to tell 'the truth about oneself. The renowned critic Edward Said spoke for many when he called Miller's book 'an essential companion to a reading of late twentieth-century Western culture'.[5]

What this 'essential companion' reveals is the centrality of the idea of self-creation in contemporary thought. If Nietzsche's iconoclastic attack on universal norms has given birth to postmodernist scepticism, its corollary - that one has to create one's own norms - is becoming almost equally influential. Since individuals have no obligation to conform to a pattern set in heaven, they are free to fashion themselves in whatever way they choose. One's nature and one's values are not given; they are invented. 'Let us,' Nietzsche urged his readers, ‘be involved in the creation of our own new tables of values ... we want to be those who give themselves their own law, those who create themselves!' ‘One thing is needed,' he declared, 'to give style to one's character - a great and rare art.' And the way to do this, he insisted, was by unlocking the 'Dionysian' element in one's personality - the wild, untamed, animal energy within, one's own personal *daimon.* 'Man needs what is most evil in him for what is best in him.' Only by exercising 'the will to power' could one discover transcendence.

In a 1983 interview, Foucault made it clear that he endorsed Nietzsche's views on self-creation. Sartre and California's New Agers had gone awry, he suggested, because they had introduced the notion of 'authenticity', implying that one had to be faithful to one's *true* self. In fact, there was nothing within or without to which one had to be true - self-creation had no such limits. It was about aesthetics, not morals; one's only concern should be to fashion a self that was 'a work of art'.

Like Nietzsche, Foucault believed that the tools for such self-fashioning were to be found in what he called 'limit experience' - experience of extremes which could release powerful creative forces and produce intense joy. His fascination with madness, death, violence, perversion and suicide was nourished by a conviction that these were not things to be ignored, cured or locked away, but creative phenomena to be released. His books were not simply negative critiques of oppression; they included an implicit challenge to liberate oneself by transgressing boundaries. *Madness and Civilisation,* for example, implied that the irrational side of the human personality should be explored rather than contained.

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